

## Abject

Abject art is an art form associated with Material and Object art, and refers to works, which contain abject subjects, materials and substances. The term "Abject art" was first used in the 1990s, by the French literary theorist and psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva (born 1941). In her book "Pouvoirs de l'horreur. Essai sur l'abjection", Kristeva introduced the idea of "abjection" as the basis of a fundamental differentiation between the self and non-self. Abjection was defined as a reaction to the confrontation with the "abject", triggered by disgust or phobia (in this context, it refers to the products of processes of elimination, corpses and insects) which nonetheless have no status as objects, and do not belong to the self, and thus are seen as a threat by the subject, who rejects them. The word "abject" derives from the Latin word "abicere" (English: to throw away) and the French word "abject". □

The roots of Abject art can be traced back to the early 20th century. The Surrealists made the first abject art works, which was particularly pronounced in Hans Bellmer's (1902-75) oeuvre. Abject art often triggered religious and political debates, one key example being Andre Serrano's (born 1950) "Piss Christ" (1987), which shows a crucifix submerged in the artist's urine. It was subsequently regarded as an icon of Abject art. Female artists made important contributions to Abject art, particularly in connection with feminist debates and an increased focus on the body. VALIE EXPORT's (born 1940) work "Aktionshose: Genitalpanik" (1969) thematised the artist's abject body parts by depicting herself wearing a pair of trousers with a missing crotch. At the beginning of the 1970s, Judy Chicago (born 1939) made menstruation the focus of a number of her works ("Red Flag" 1971 and "Menstruation Bathroom" (1972)). Other artists whose work is associated with the genre includes Vito Acconci, Cindy Sherman, Kiki Smith, Carolee Schneemann and Hannah Wilke.

Arthttp://eprints.lancs.ac.uk/27150/1/Against\_Abjectionversion\_final\_draft.pdf

[Against Abjection: violent disgust and the maternal](#)

by I Tyler - 2009 –

<http://hooverhog.typepad.com/hognotes/2012/05/abjection-in-all-its-forms-an-interview-with-mikita-brottman.html>

ACCORDING TO JULIA KRISTEVA in the *Powers of Horror*, the abject refers to the human reaction (horror, vomit) to a threatened breakdown in meaning caused by the loss of the distinction between subject and object or between self and other. The primary example for what causes such a reaction is the corpse (which traumatically reminds us of our own materiality); however, other items can elicit the same reaction: the open wound, shit, sewage, even the skin that forms on the surface of warm milk.

Kristeva's understanding of the "abject" provides a helpful term to contrast to Lacan's "object of desire" or the "*objet petit a*." ([See Lacan Module on Desire.](#)) Whereas the *objet petit a* allows a subject to coordinate his or her desires, thus allowing the [symbolic order](#) of meaning and intersubjective community to persist, the abject "is radically excluded and," as Kristeva explains, "draws me toward the place where meaning collapses" ([Powers 2](#)). It is neither object nor subject; the abject is situated, rather, at a place before we entered into the [symbolic order](#). ([On the symbolic order, see, in particular, the Lacan module on psychosexual development.](#)) As Kristeva puts it, "Abjection preserves what existed in the archaism of pre-objectal relationship, in the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be" ([Powers 10](#)). The abject marks what Kristeva terms a "primal repression," one that precedes the establishment of the subject's relation to its objects of desire and of representation, before even the establishment of the opposition, conscious/unconscious. Kristeva refers, instead, to the moment in our psychosexual development when we established a border or separation between human and animal, between culture and that which preceded it. On the level of archaic memory, Kristeva refers to the primitive effort to separate ourselves from the animal: "by way of abjection, primitive societies have marked out a precise area of their culture in order to remove it from the threatening world of animals or animalism, which were imagined as representatives of sex and murder" ([Powers 12-13](#)). On the level of our individual psychosexual development, the abject marks the moment when we separated ourselves from the mother, when we began to recognize a boundary between "me" and other, between "me" and "(m)other." (See the [Kristeva Module on Psychosexual Development.](#)) As explained in the previous module, the abject is "*a precondition of narcissism*" ([Powers 13](#)), which is to say, a precondition for the [narcissism](#) of [the mirror stage](#), which occur after we establish these primal distinctions. The abject thus at once represents the threat that meaning is breaking down and constitutes our reaction to such a breakdown: a reestablishment of our "primal repression." The abject has to do with "what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules" ([Powers 4](#)) and, so, can also include crimes like Auschwitz. Such crimes are abject precisely because they draw attention to the "fragility of the law" ([Powers 4](#)).

More specifically, Kristeva associates the abject with the eruption of [the Real](#) into our lives. In particular, she associates such a response with our rejection of death's insistent materiality. Our reaction to such abject material re-charges what is essentially a pre-lingual response. Kristeva therefore is quite careful to differentiate *knowledge* of death or the *meaning* of death (both of which can exist within [the symbolic order](#)) from the traumatic experience of being actually confronted with the sort of materiality that traumatically *shows you* your own death:

A wound with blood and pus, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay, does not *signify* death. In the presence of signified death—a flat encephalograph, for instance—I would understand, react, or accept. No, as in true theater, without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in

order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. (*Powers 3*)

The corpse especially exemplifies Kristeva's concept since it literalizes the breakdown of the distinction between subject and object that is crucial for the establishment of identity and for our entrance into *the symbolic order*. What we are confronted with when we experience the trauma of seeing a human corpse (particularly the corpse of a friend or family member) is our own eventual death made palpably real. As Kristeva puts it, "The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject" (*Powers 4*).

The abject must also be disguised from desire (which is tied up with the meaning-structures of *the symbolic order*). It is associated, rather, with both fear and *jouissance*. In phobia, Kristeva reads the trace of a pre-linguistic confrontation with the abject, a moment that precedes the recognition of any actual object of fear: "The phobic object shows up at the place of non-objectal states of *drive* and assumes all the mishaps of *drive* as disappointed desires or as desires diverted from their objects" (*Powers 35*). The object of fear is, in other words, a *substitute formation* for the subject's abject relation to *drive*. The fear of, say, heights really stands in the place of a much more primal fear: the fear caused by the breakdown of any distinction between subject and object, of any distinction between ourselves and the world of dead material objects. Kristeva also associates the abject with *jouissance*: "One does not know it, one does not desire it, one joys in it [*on en jouit*]. Violently and painfully. A passion" (*Powers 9*). This statement appears paradoxical, but what Kristeva means by such statements is that we are, despite everything, continually and repetitively drawn to the abject (much as we are repeatedly drawn to trauma in Freud's understanding of *repetition compulsion*). To experience the abject in literature carries with it a certain pleasure but one that is quite different from the dynamics of desire. Kristeva associates this aesthetic experience of the abject, rather, with poetic catharsis: "an impure process that protects from the abject only by dint of being immersed in it" (*Powers 29*).

The abject for Kristeva is, therefore, closely tied both to religion and to art, which she sees as two ways of purifying the abject: "The various means of *purifying* the abject—the various catharses—make up the history of religions, and end up with that catharsis par excellence called art, both on the far and near side of religion" (*Powers 17*). According to Kristeva, the best modern literature (Dostoevsky, Proust, Artaud, Céline, Kafka, etc.) explores the place of the abject, a place where boundaries begin to breakdown, where we are confronted with an archaic space before such linguistic binaries as self/other or subject/object. The transcendent or sublime, for Kristeva, is really our effort to cover over the breakdowns (and subsequent reassertion of boundaries) associated with the abject; and literature is the privileged space for both the sublime and abject: "On close inspection, all literature is probably a version of the apocalypse that seems to me rooted, no matter what its sociohistorical conditions might be, on the

fragile border (borderline cases) where identities (subject/object, etc.) do not exist or only barely so—double, fuzzy, heterogeneous, animal, metamorphosed, altered, abject" ([Powers 207](#)). According to Kristeva, literature explores the way that language is structured over a lack, a want. She privileges poetry, in particular, because of poetry's willingness to play with grammar, metaphor and meaning, thus laying bear the fact that language is at once arbitrary and limned with the abject fear of loss: "Not a language of the desiring exchange of messages or objects that are transmitted in a social contract of communication and desire beyond want, but a language of want, of the fear that edges up to it and runs along its edges" ([Powers 38](#)).

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## Dictionary Definition

<http://abject.askdefine.com>

abject adj

- 1 of the most contemptible kind; "abject cowardice"; "a low stunt to pull"; "a low-down sneak"; "his miserable treatment of his family"; "You miserable skunk!"; "a scummy rabble"; "a scurvy trick" [syn: low, low-down, miserable, scummy, scurvy]
- 2 most unfortunate or miserable; "the most abject slaves joined in the revolt"; "abject poverty"
- 3 showing utter resignation or hopelessness; "abject surrender" [syn: resigned, unhopeful]
- 4 showing humiliation or submissiveness; "an abject apology"

## User Contributed Dictionary

### English

### Etymology

From abjectus, past participle of abjicere to reject, formed from ab- + jacere, to throw

### Pronunciation 1

- , /'æbdʒekt/, /"

### Extensive Definition

The term Abjection literally means "the state of being cast off." The concept of abject exists in between the concept of an object and the concept of the subject, something alive yet not. In contemporary critical theory, it is often used to describe the state of often-marginalized groups, such as people of color, prostitutes, homosexuals, convicts, poor people and handicapped persons. This term originated in the works of Julia Kristeva. Often, the term space of abjection is also used, referring to a space that abjected things or beings inhabit.

Following Kristeva's formulation of abjection in Powers of Horror - An Essay on Abjection, abjection can be seen as letting go of something we would still like to keep. In the case of blood, semen, hair and excrement / urine, we recognize these as once being a part of ourselves, thus these forms of the abject are taken out of our system while bits of them remain in our selves. When one encounters blood, excrement, etc. outside of the body, one is forced to confront what was once a part of oneself, but no longer is. Dismemberment compels the same kind of heightened reaction when one confronts the horror of detachment. A dismembered finger or limb is identified as belonging to one's own body and is 'missed' while at the same time repulsive to the viewer for no longer being a part of the whole. Because humans frequently shed skin and blood etc. there is a higher tolerance to it and we are not as horrified as we would be in the case of dismemberment, yet most are not willing to engage with excrement or blood due to its detached nature. In a way, we exist in abjection: the process of creating our self (identity) is never-ending. The act of "selfing" ("identifying") ourselves is the only common feature of all people.

According to Kristeva, since the abject is situated outside the symbolic order, being forced to face it is an inherently traumatic experience. For example, upon being faced with a corpse, a person would be most likely repulsed because he or she is forced to face an object which is violently cast out of the cultural world, having once been a subject. We encounter other beings daily, and more often than not they are alive. To confront a corpse of one that we recognize as human, something that should be alive but isn't, is to confront the reality that we are capable of existing in the same state, our own mortality. This repulsion from death, excrement and rot constitutes the subject as a living being in the symbolic order.

This act is done in the light of the parts of ourselves that we exclude: un-namely – the mother. We must abject the maternal, the object which has created us, in

order to construct an identity. This is done on the micro level of the speaking being, through her subjective dynamics, as well as on the macro level of society, through "language as a common and universal law." We use rituals, specifically those of defilement, in order to maintain clear boundaries between nature and society, the semiotic and the symbolic. This line of thought begins with [Mary Douglas](#)' important book, [Purity and Danger](#), as well as in Kristeva's own [Black Sun](#).

The concept of abject is often coupled (and sometimes confused with) the idea of [the uncanny](#), the concept of something being "un-home-like", or foreign, yet familiar. The abject can be uncanny in the sense that we can recognize aspects in it, despite its being "foreign". An example, continuing on the one used above, is that of a corpse, namely the corpse of a loved one. We will recognize that person as being close to us, but the fact that the person is dead, and "no longer" the familiar loved one, is what creates a sort of [cognitive dissonance](#), leading to abjection of the corpse.

### ***The Post-Kristevan Meta-Order of Abjection***

In Kristeva's works, abjection explains how beings in the cultural symbolic order would be repulsed, traumatised upon facing an abject entity. In addition to this system, it has been suggested that abject entities do not just float outside of the symbolic order but form their own sub-order, that co-exist alongside the symbolic order, creating a greater meta-order. In an ideal illustration, a large galaxy would represent the social cosmos and would contain one central swirling mass (a microcosm of cultural order), an empty or grayed space (representative of the abject's distance from social acceptance) and many, smaller, somewhat-attached masses, the pseudo-order of the many instances of the abject which are often only related by their shared location within abject space. All of these revolve around and are influenced by the force of the gravity (the force of the human condition) which originates from the central-most point (the phenomena created by human necessity and nature).

Representation of the post-Kristeva order of abjection (above)

### ***The abject in fiction***

According to [Barbara Creed](#) in [Horror and the Monstrous Feminine](#) a male's relationship with the mother and other females is complicated by the use of the feminine in [horror](#) and [science fiction](#) as we are forced to confront it as horrific and abject. Through an analysis of the film [Alien](#) (1979) and the female roles and representations, Creed explains how females are often related to the object of horror, be they as the object of horror or the object of the actual horrors' desire/hatred. The conclusion is that through monstrous representations of the female or the Mother, the audience is drawn into viewing them as abject rather than subject or object. The aliens themselves from the film in question are often described as having [phallus](#)-like appendages in the shape of their head and tongue, while maintaining an almost female form. Their interaction with the human crew takes on very abject roles as one crew member, a male, is forcibly impregnated (clearly as a product of rape) with an alien that eventually rips itself from the male 'womb' in a horrific scene of blood and gore. The process of a male being impregnated through the mouth with a creature that gestates -- in a being



that has no womb -- and rips itself free in a shower of blood is one way in which this film abjectifies female roles.

Abjection is also a major theme of the 1949 work [The Thief's Journal](#) (Journal du Voleur) by French author [Jean Genet](#). As a criminal outcast from society, during a fictionalised account of his wanderings through Europe in the 1930s, he claims to actively seek abjections as an [existentialist](#) form of 'sainthood.'

*See also*

- [Alterity](#)
- [Other](#)

*External links*

- [Julia Kristeva, "Approaching Abjection"](#). This is an extensive excerpt of (most ) chapter one of Kristeva's, "Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection".
- [Modules on Kristeva II: on the abject](#)

**Synonyms, Antonyms and Related Words**

[abominable](#), [accepting](#), [acquiescent](#), [agreeable](#), [apologetic](#), [arrant](#), [assenting](#), [atrocious](#), [backscratching](#), [base](#), [beggarly](#), [bootlicking](#), [cheesy](#), [complaisant](#), [compliant](#), [complying](#), [consenting](#), [contemptible](#), [contrite](#), [cowering](#), [crawling](#), [cringing](#), [crouching](#), [crummy](#), [debased](#), [degraded](#), [depraved](#), [despicable](#), [dirty](#), [disgusting](#), [execrable](#), [fawning](#), [flagrant](#), [flattering](#), [footlicking](#), [foul](#), [fulsome](#), [grave](#), [gross](#), [groveling](#), [hangdog](#), [heinous](#), [humble](#), [humble-minded](#), [humble-spirited](#), [humbled](#), [humblehearted](#), [ingratiating](#), [little](#), [low](#), [low-down](#), [lumpen](#), [mangy](#), [mealymouthed](#), [mean](#), [measly](#), [meek](#), [meek-minded](#), [meek-spirited](#), [meekhearted](#), [melted](#), [miserable](#), [monstrous](#), [nefarious](#), [nondissenting](#), [nonresistant](#), [nonresisting](#), [nonresistive](#), [obedient](#), [obeisant](#), [obnoxious](#), [obsequious](#), [odious](#), [on bended knee](#), [paltry](#), [parasitic](#), [passive](#), [penitent](#), [penitential](#), [penitentiary](#), [petty](#), [poky](#), [poor](#), [poor in spirit](#), [prostrate](#), [rank](#), [repentant](#), [reptilian](#), [resigned](#), [scabby](#), [scrubby](#), [scruffy](#), [scummy](#), [scurvy](#), [servile](#), [shabby](#), [sheepish](#), [shoddy](#), [small](#), [sniveling](#), [softened](#), [sponging](#), [squalid](#), [submissive](#), [subservient](#), [supine](#), [sycophantic](#), [timeserving](#), [toadeating](#), [toadying](#), [toadyish](#), [touched](#), [truckling](#), [unassertive](#), [uncomplaining](#), [underfoot](#), [unmentionable](#), [unresistant](#), [unresisting](#), [vile](#), [wretched](#)